

STARK RESPONDS TO OIG REPORT ON MEDICARE CALL CENTERS

Thursday, 27 September 2007

Dear Administrator Weems: Congratulations! As CMS's new Acting Administrator, you're the lucky guy who gets to clean up the mess your predecessors left behind.

MEDIA ADVISORY, Friday, September 28, 2007

CONTACT: Yoni Cohen, Stark (202) 225-3202

STARK RESPONDS TO OIG REPORT ON MEDICARE CALL CENTERS, ASKS WEEMS TO CLEAN UP PREDECESSORS'S MESS

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), Chairman of the Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, today sent a letter to CMS Acting Administrator Kerry Weems in response to a new report from the Department of Health and Human Services's Office of Inspector General (OIG). The report found that the performance of the private contractor(s) hired to run Medicare's 1-800-MEDICARE call centers was sub-par – and had gotten worse since the OIG's previous review in 2004.

The text of the letter follows. It is also available [here](#).

September 28, 2007

Kerry Weems

Acting Administrator

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

7500 Security Boulevard

Baltimore, Maryland 21244

Dear Administrator Weems:

Congratulations! As CMS's new Acting Administrator, you're the lucky guy who gets to clean up the mess your predecessors left behind. As HHS's Office of Inspector General documented yesterday in its latest report, the performance of the private contractor(s) hired to run Medicare's call centers leaves much to be desired.

-- More than one in five callers (21%) hangs up before having their questions answered. Two-thirds of those who hang up do so because of long wait times.

-- Almost three in ten callers (29%) are not satisfied with the responses they receive.

-- Nearly half of callers (44%) have difficulty accessing information.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think your predecessors — and their boss, President George Bush — didn't want Medicare's call centers to provide seniors and people with disabilities with accurate and complete information. To wit, since HHS's Inspector General reviewed private call centers' performance in 2004, they've gotten worse, not better!

-- The proportion of callers who hung up in frustration increased by nearly one in ten (9%).

-- The proportion of callers who were not satisfied increased by more than one in ten (13%).

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The proportion of callers who had difficulty accessing information remained constant (44%). Given the wrong direction in which other quality measures went, I consider this to be CMS's crowning achievement. Bravo!

According to the OIG, two contractors operated 1-800-MEDICARE call centers at the time of its review. In June of 2007, one of these contractors assumed operations of all 1-800-MEDICARE call

centers.

Based on CMS's record, I can only assume the agency selected the private contractor whose service left beneficiaries less satisfied and more frustrated. Were these in fact the criteria agency employed in selecting one of the two contractors?

You, your predecessors and President Bush have repeatedly argued that our health care system should "pay for performance." I therefore write you to inquire if CMS will continue to pay the private contractor who currently runs 1-800-Medicare for their substandard performance or seek a new contractor who can better serve Medicare's beneficiaries. If CMS intends to retain the current contractor, what measures are the agency and the private contractor taking to improve the accuracy, completeness, and timeliness of call center responses?

Sincerely,

Pete Stark

Chairman, Ways and Means Health Subcommittee